

Both saving and
destroying: water
imagery in moby dick



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There are two sides to everything, whether it be a situation, decision, or even a person, perspective is important when evaluating the positives and negatives of anything. For instance, on an extremely hot day the sun is viewed as a negative thing, as it causes extreme heat, yet when the sun comes out during a cold day it is viewed as a saving grace. This same situation occurs in Melville's novel, *Moby Dick*, when analyzing the water imagery and its effects on the characters within the novel. The ocean is depicted as a transcendental body of water, carrying a sacred aura at all times throughout the journey. Melville uses water imagery within *Moby Dick* to convey water as possessing both redemptive and damning characteristics.

First off, Melville paints water imagery with redemptive qualities throughout *Moby Dick*. Ishmael starts by explaining how the mind is connected to water, claiming that "meditation and water are wedded forever" (Melville 18).

According to Ishmael, water provides a chance for a search for self, in this case Ishmael is going out to sea to find his true identity. He relates it to the story of Narcissus, who drowned after staring at his reflection in the water.

The reason Narcissus was staring into his reflection, according to Ishmael, is that he was searching for the image all people search for in water, "the ungraspable phantom of life" (Melville 19). Ishmael is searching for something he can never obtain; the water leads him to a life of meaning, yet he can never reach the life he desires. In addition to both Ishmael and Narcissus being drawn to water, Bulkington, a southern sailor, is also considered a water gazer. Although he died a violent death, his death carried a transcendental sensation. Ishmael says that, "up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing—straight up, leaps thy apotheosis!" (Melville 122). The

deification of Bulkington is evidence of a redeeming imagery of water, as an ascension resulting from a death in the ocean depicts water as a path of redemption and glory. In addition to this, Ishmael claims that, "in landlines alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God," implying that the redeeming nature of water contains a sacred, holy image (Melville 122).

Later in the novel, Ishmael goes on watch for whales, but he is overcome with water gazing, losing himself in the image of water beneath him. From the crow's nest, he "takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature" (Melville 174). Not only does this pertain to the redemptive qualities of the water imagery, but it also refers to the collective unconscious. Narcissus, Ishmael, and Bulkington all share the unconscious desire to not only be near water, but also stare into it and search the water for themselves. All people share a common fascination for the deep, blue ocean that seems like its own soul at times. The complexity of the water imagery is present when the Pequod tries to pursue a whale for days, but never reach it. The spout they spot kept evading them, Ishmael describes it as, "this solitary jet seemed forever alluring us on" (Melville 250). This spout represents the phantom of life that Ishmael is searching for, yet can never obtain. Both the spout and phantom of life are celestial and dreadful, as they appear glorious and holy, yet they cause much pain and dread in pursuit. Overall, the complex water imagery contains a redemptive quality that is evident in the search for self that is fueled by water.

Secondly, the water imagery within Moby Dick also has damning qualities that contradict the redemptive qualities. Although the ocean is often

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depicted as redemptive, there are many cases where a paradox of qualities occurs and the ocean is the most terrifying thing one can experience. This is the case for Pip, a young member of the crew who fell victim to the damning qualities of the vast ocean. The solitude of the open ocean is incredible horrifying, as Melville writes “ the awful loneliness is intolerable. The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God!” (Melville 431). Whereas the ocean provides a positive search for self, it can also force someone to experience the kind of solitude that ruins lives, as it did Pip’s. The loneliness of the ocean is shared deep within the minds of all people, evidence of the collective unconscious. From a safe perspective, the ocean can be viewed as a place to find comfort, but when tossed into the ferocious waves with a “ ringed horizon... expand[ing] around him miserably,” Pip found himself losing his individuality and soul as a result of the daunting vastness of the ocean (Melville 431). While floating in the infinite waters, Pip is “ carried down alive to wondrous depths... he saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it” (Melville 432). The weaver image of God appears and portrays God as weaving the universe together, sealing the fates of all people on Earth. This seems like a redeeming quality of the water imagery, but the text proves otherwise.

Pip’s foresight into the presence of God took his soul and left his finite body empty, as if his soul had glimpsed into the afterlife and remained there, yet his body remained on Earth. The sea is mocking him, by keeping his body on Earth and sending his soul away, the damning nature of the water imagery is revealed. The image of the weaver God reappears when Tranquo shows Ishmael a whale skeleton, covered by vines and wood. Ishmael relates the

whale bones to the image of God the weaver, claiming that “ life folded death; death trellised life” (Melville 466). The damning quality of water imagery is seen in the image of a weaver God that is death disguised as life. By claiming that life folded death, Ishmael is concluding that the weaver God acts as death, but disguises himself as life to appear redemptive. The water imagery acts in the same way, as it contains a damning quality that disguises itself as a redemptive quality. The search for self that water sparks is a cover up for the loneliness that can be discovered in the open ocean. Pip serves as an example that as the search for oneself progresses, they will soon find themselves surrounded by an infinite horizon of water, with an overwhelming feeling of solitude rushing in. This is similar Bulkington’s death, but he found peace and glory in the nature of his death at sea. The complexity of water imagery in Moby Dick is evident in the paradox of redemptive and damning qualities.

Within Melville’s novel, Moby Dick, water imagery is used to convey both redemptive and damning qualities of water. But the paradox of qualities is not the only thing Melville uses water imagery for. He hints at the collective unconscious when using water imagery, and uses the imagery to suggest the presence of a collective unconscious. There is an innate level of consciousness that all people share, in this case a connection to water. There exists an unbreakable bond between water and the mind, and this connection is apparent in the journey of Ishmael and the whole crew among the Pequod.